

Lesson

1

---

# Understanding Style

*Essentially style resembles good manners. It comes of endeavouring to understand others, of thinking for them rather than yourself—or thinking, that is, with the heart as well as the head.*

—SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

*The great enemy of clear language is insincerity.*

—GEORGE ORWELL

*In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.*

—OSCAR WILDE

## PRINCIPLES AND AIMS

This book rests on two principles: it is good to write clearly, and anyone can. The first is self-evident, especially to those who must read a lot of writing like this:

An understanding of the causal factors involved in excessive drinking by students could lead to their more effective treatment.

But that second principle may seem optimistic to those who want to write clearly, but can't get close to this:

We could more effectively treat students who drink excessively if we understood why they do.

Of course, writing fails for reasons more serious than unclear sentences. We bewilder readers when we can't organize complex ideas coherently (an issue I address in Lesson 11). And they won't even read what we've written unless we motivate them to (an issue I address in Lesson 10). But once we've formulated our claims, organized supporting reasons, grounded them on sound evidence, and motivated readers to read attentively, we must still express it all clearly, a difficult task for most writers and a daunting one for many.

It is a problem that has afflicted generations of writers who have hidden their ideas not only from their readers, but sometimes even from themselves. When we read that kind of writing in government regulations, we call it *bureaucratese*; when we read it in legal documents, *legalese*; in academic writing that inflates small ideas into gassy abstractions, *academese*. Written deliberately or carelessly, it is a language of exclusion that a democracy cannot tolerate. It is also a problem with a long history.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF UNCLEAR WRITING

### The Past

It wasn't until about the middle of the sixteenth century that writers of English decided that it was eloquent enough to replace Latin and French in serious discourse. But their first efforts were written in a style so complex that it defeated easy understanding:

If use and custom, having the help of so long time and continuance wherein to [re]fine our tongue, of so great learning and experience

which furnish matter for the [re]fining, of so good wits and judgments which can tell how to refine, have griped at nothing in all that time, with all that cunning, by all those wits which they won't let go but hold for most certain in the right of our writing, that then our tongue has no certainty to trust to, but write all at random.

—Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementary*, 1582

Within a century, a complex style had spread to the writing of scientists (or, as they were called, *natural philosophers*). As one complained,

Of all the studies of men, nothing may sooner be obtained than this vicious abundance of phrase, this trick of metaphors, this volubility of tongue which makes so great a noise in the world.

—Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, 1667

When this continent was settled, writers could have established a new, democratic prose style, neither noisy nor voluble, but simple and direct. In fact, in 1776, the plain words of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* helped inspire our Revolution:

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense.

Sad to say, he sparked no revolution in our national prose style.

By the early nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper was complaining about our writing:

The love of turgid expressions is gaining ground, and ought to be corrected. One of the most certain evidences of a man of high breeding, is his simplicity of speech: a simplicity that is equally removed from vulgarity and exaggeration. . . . Simplicity should be the firm aim, after one is removed from vulgarity. . . . In no case, however, can one who aims at turgid language, exaggerated sentiments, or pedantic utterances, lay claim to be either a man or a woman of the world.

—James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat*, 1838

Unfortunately, in abusing that style, Cooper adopted it. Had he followed his own advice, he might have written,

We should discourage those who love turgid language. A well-bred person speaks simply, in a way that is neither vulgar nor exaggerated. No one can claim to be a man or woman of the world who exaggerates sentiments or deliberately speaks in ways that are turgid or pedantic.

About fifty years later, Mark Twain wrote what we now think is classic American prose. He said this about Cooper's style:

There have been daring people in the world who claimed that Cooper could write English, but they are all dead now—all dead but Lounsbury [an academic who praised Cooper's style]. . . . [He] says that *Deerslayer* is a "pure work of art." . . . [But] Cooper wrote about the poorest English that exists in our language, and . . . the English of *Deerslayer* is the very worst tha[t] even Cooper ever wrote.

As much as we all admire Twain's directness, few of us emulate it.

## The Present

In the best-known essay on modern English style, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell anatomized the turgid language of politicians, bureaucrats, academics, and other such windy speakers and writers:

The keynote [of a pretentious style] is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as *break, stop, spoil, mend, kill*, a verb becomes a phrase, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purpose verb such as *prove, serve, form, play, render*. In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (*by examination* of instead of *by examining*).

But as Cooper did, in abusing that style Orwell adopted it. He could have written more concisely:

Pretentious writers avoid simple verbs. Instead of using one word, such as *break, stop, kill*, they turn the verb into a noun or adjective, then tack onto it a general-purpose verb such as *prove, serve, form, play, render*. They use the passive voice everywhere instead of the active, and noun constructions instead of gerunds (*by examination* instead of *by examining*).

If the best-known critic of a turgid style could not resist it, we ought not be surprised that politicians and academics embrace it. On the language of the social sciences:

A turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social sciences. . . . Such a lack of ready intelligibility, I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of thought. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status.

—C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

On the language of medicine:

It now appears that obligatory obfuscation is a firm tradition within the medical profession. . . . [Medical writing] is a highly skilled, calculated attempt to confuse the reader. . . . A doctor feels he might get passed over for an assistant professorship because he wrote his papers too clearly—because he made his ideas seem too simple.

—Michael Crichton, *New England Journal of Medicine*

On the language of law:

In law journals, in speeches, in classrooms and in courtrooms, lawyers and judges are beginning to worry about how often they have been misunderstood, and they are discovering that sometimes they can't even understand each other.

—Tom Goldstein, *New York Times*

On the language of science:

There are times when the more the authors explain [about ape communication], the less we understand. Apes certainly seem capable of using language to communicate. Whether scientists are remains doubtful.

—Douglas Chadwick, *New York Times*

Most of us first confront that kind of writing in textbook sentences like this one:

Recognition of the fact that systems [of grammar] differ from one language to another can serve as the basis for serious consideration of the problems confronting translators of the great works of world literature originally written in a language other than English.

In about half as many words, that means,

When we recognize that languages have different grammars, we can consider the problems of those who translate great works of literature into English.

Generations of students have struggled with dense writing, many thinking they weren't smart enough to grasp a writer's deep ideas. Some have been right about that, but more could have blamed the writer's inability (or refusal) to write clearly. Many students, sad to say, give up; sadder still, others learn not only to read that style but to write it, inflicting it on the next generation of readers, thereby sustaining a 450-year-old tradition of unreadable writing.

## SOME PRIVATE CAUSES OF UNCLEAR WRITING

If unclear writing has a long social history, it also has private causes. Michael Crichton mentioned one: some writers plump up their prose to impress those who think that complicated sentences indicate deep thinking. And in fact, when we want to hide the fact that we don't know what we're talking about, we typically throw up a tangle of abstract words in long, complex sentences.

Others write graceless prose not deliberately but because they are seized by the idea that writing is good only when it is free of errors that only a grammarian can explain. They approach a blank page not as a space to explore new ideas, but as a minefield to cross gingerly. They creep from word to word, concerned less with their readers' understanding than with their own survival. I address that issue in Lesson 2.

Others write unclearly because they freeze up, especially when they are learning to think and write in a new academic or professional setting. The afflicted include not just undergraduates taking their first course in economics or psychology, but graduate students, businesspeople, doctors, lawyers—anyone writing on a new topic for unfamiliar and therefore intimidating readers.

As we struggle to master new ideas, most of us write worse than we do when we write about things we understand better. If that sounds like you, take heart: you will write more clearly once you more clearly understand your subject and readers.

But the biggest reason most of us write unclearly is that we don't know when others think we do, much less why. What we write always seems clearer to us than it does to our readers, because we can read into it what we want them to get out of it. And so instead of revising our writing to meet their needs, we send it off the moment it meets ours.

In all of this, of course, there is a great irony: we are likely to confuse others when we write about a subject that confuses us. But when we also read about a confusing subject written in a complex style, we too easily assume that its complexity signals deep thought, and so we try to imitate it, compounding our already confused writing.

This book shows you how to avoid that trap, how to read your own writing as others will, and, when you should, how to make it better.

## ON WRITING AND REWRITING

A warning: if you think about the principles offered here *as you draft*, you may never draft anything. Most experienced writers get something down on paper or up on the screen as fast as they can. Then as they rewrite that first draft into something clearer, they understand their ideas better. And when they understand their ideas better, they express them more clearly, and the more clearly they express them, the better they understand them . . . and so it goes, until they run out of energy, interest, or time.

For a fortunate few, that moment comes weeks, months, even years after they begin. (Over the last twenty-five years, I've wrestled this book through dozens of drafts, and there are parts I still can't get right.) For most of us, though, the deadline is closer to tomorrow morning. And so we have to settle for prose that is less than perfect, but as good as we can make it. (Perfection is the ideal, but a barrier to done.)

So use what you find here not as rules to impose on every sentence *as you draft it*, but as principles to help you identify already-written sentences likely to give your readers a problem, and then to revise those sentences quickly.

As important as clarity is, though, some occasions call for more:

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are; but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation,” a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

—John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

Few of us are called upon to write a presidential address, but in even our modest prose, some of us take a private pleasure in writing a shapely sentence, regardless of whether anyone will notice. If you enjoy not just writing a sentence but crafting it, you will find suggestions in Lesson 9. In Lessons 10 and 11, I go beyond the clarity of individual sentences to discuss the coherence of a whole document. Writing is also a social act that might or might not serve the best interests of readers, so in Lesson 12, I address some issues about the ethics of style. In an Appendix, I discuss styles of punctuation.

Many years ago, H. L. Mencken wrote this:

With precious few exceptions, all the books on style in English are by writers quite unable to write. The subject, indeed, seems to exercise a special and dreadful fascination over school ma'ams, bucolic college professors, and other such pseudoliterates. . . . Their central aim, of course, is to reduce the whole thing to a series of simple rules—the overmastering passion of their melancholy order, at all times and everywhere.

Mencken was right: no one learns to write well by rule, especially those who cannot feel or think or see. But I know that many who do see clearly, feel deeply, and think carefully can't write sentences that make their thoughts, feelings, and visions clear to others. I also know that the more clearly we write, the more clearly we see and feel and think. Rules help no one do that, but some principles can.

Here they are.

Lesson

2

---

# Correctness

*God does not much mind bad grammar, but He does not take any particular pleasure in it.*

—ERASMUS

*No grammatical rules have sufficient authority to control the firm and established usage of language. Established custom, in speaking and writing, is the standard to which we must at last resort for determining every controverted point in language and style.*

—HUGH BLAIR

*English usage is sometimes more than mere taste, judgment, and education—sometimes it's sheer luck, like getting across the street.*

—E. B. WHITE

## UNDERSTANDING CORRECTNESS

To a careful writer, nothing is more important than choice, but in some matters, we have none—we can't put *the* after a NOUN, as in *street the* (capitalized words are defined in the Glossary). But we choose when we can. For example, which of these sentences would you choose to write if you wanted readers to think you wrote clearly?

1. Lack of media support was the cause of our election loss.
2. We lost the election because the media did not support us.

Most of us choose (2).

Unlike clarity, though, correctness seems a matter not of choice, but of obedience. When the *American Heritage Dictionary* says that *irregardless* is “never acceptable” (except, they say, for humor), our freedom to choose it seems at best academic. In matters of this kind, we choose not between better and worse, but between right and utterly, irredeemably, unequivocally Wrong. Which, of course, is no choice at all.

But that lack of choice does seem to simplify things: “Correctness” requires not sound judgment but only a good memory. If we remember that *irregardless* is always Wrong, it ought not rise to an even subconscious level of choice. Some teachers and editors think we should memorize dozens of such “rules”:

- Never begin a sentence with *and* or *but*.
- Never use double negatives.
- Never split INFINITIVES.

It is, however, more complicated than that. Some rules are real—if we ignore them, we risk being labeled at least unschooled: our verbs must agree with subjects; our pronouns must agree with their referents. There are many others. But some often repeated rules are less important than many think; some are not even real rules. And if you obsess over them all, you hinder yourself from writing quickly and clearly. That's why I address “correctness” now, before clarity, because I want to put it where it belongs—behind us.

## RULES OF GRAMMAR AND THE BASIS OF THEIR AUTHORITY

Opinion is split on the social role of rules of grammar. To some, they are just another device that the Ins use to control the Outs by stigmatizing their language and thereby discourage their social and political aspirations. To others, the rules of Standard English have been so refined by generations of educated speakers and writers that they are now a force of nature and therefore observed by all the best writers of English—or at least should be.

### Correctness as Historical Accident

Both views are correct, partly. For centuries, those governing our affairs have used grammatical “errors” to screen out those unwilling or unable to acquire the habits of the schooled middle class. But they are wrong to claim that those rules were *devised* for that end. Standard forms of a language originate in accidents of geography and economic power. When a language has different regional dialects, that of the most powerful speakers usually becomes the most prestigious and the basis for a nation's “correct” writing.

Thus if some geographical accident had put Scotland closer to Europe than London is, and if its capital, Edinburgh, had become the center of Britain's economic, political, and literary life, we would speak and write less like Shakespeare and more like the Scottish poet Bobby Burns:

A ye wha are sae guid yourself	(All you who are so good yourselves
Sae pious and sae holy,	So pious and so holy,
Ye've nought to do but mark	You've nothing to do but talk
and tell	about
Your neebours' fauts and folly!	Your neighbors' faults and folly!)

### Correctness as Unpredictability

Conservatives, on the other hand, are right that many rules of Standard English originated in efficient expression. For example, we no longer use all the endings that our verbs required a thousand years

ago. We now omit present tense inflections in all but one context (and we don't need it there):

	1ST PERSON	2ND PERSON	3RD PERSON
<b>Singular</b>	I know + $\emptyset$ .	You know + $\emptyset$ .	She know + <b>S</b> .
<b>Plural</b>	We know + $\emptyset$ .	You know + $\emptyset$ .	They know + $\emptyset$ .

But critics on the right are wrong when they claim that Standard English has been refined by the logic of educated speakers and writers, and so must by its very nature be superior to the de-based language of their alleged social inferiors.

True, many rules of Standard English do reflect an evolution toward logical efficiency. But if by logical we mean regular and therefore predictable, then Standard English is in many ways *less* logical than nonstandard English. For example, the Standard English contraction in *I'm here, aren't I?* is *aren't*. But what could be more unpredictably ungrammatical than the full form, *I am here, are I not?* Logically, we should contract *am + not* to *amn't*, which is in fact one historical source of the nonstandard *ain't* (the other is *are + not*). So the standard *aren't I* is less logical than the historically predictable but socially stigmatized *ain't I*. We could cite a dozen examples where the *violation* of a rule of Standard English reflects a logical mind making English grammar more consistent.

But it is, of course, the very *inconsistency* of Standard English that makes its rules so useful to those who would use them to discriminate: to speak and write Standard English, we must either be born into it or invest years learning it (along with the values of its speakers).

**Here's the point:** Those determined to discriminate will seize on any difference. But our language seems to reflect the quality of our minds more directly than do our ZIP codes, so it's easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate mental or moral deficiency. But that belief is not just factually wrong; in a democracy like ours, it is socially destructive. Yet even if logic predicts *ain't*, so much greater is the power of social convention that we avoid it, at least if we hope to be taken seriously when we write for serious purposes.

## THREE KINDS OF RULES

These corrosive social attitudes about correctness have been encouraged by generations of grammarians who, in their zeal to codify "good" English, have confused three kinds of "rules":

### Real Rules

Real rules define what makes English English: ARTICLES must precede nouns: *the book*, not *book the*. Speakers born into English don't think about these rules at all when they write, and violate them only when they are tired or distracted.

### Social Rules

Social rules distinguish Standard English from nonstandard: *He doesn't have any money* versus *He don't have no money*. Schooled writers observe these rules as naturally as they observe the Real Rules and think about them only when they notice others violating them. The only writers who *self-consciously* try to follow them are those not born into Standard English and striving to rise into the educated class.

### Invented Rules

Finally, some grammarians have invented a handful of rules that they think we all *should* observe. These are the rules that the grammar police enforce and that too many educated writers obsess over. Most date from the last half of the eighteenth century:

Don't split infinitives, as in *to quietly leave*.

Don't end a sentence with a PREPOSITION.

A few date from the twentieth century:

Don't use *hopefully* for *I hope*, as in **Hopefully**, *it won't rain*.

Don't use *which* for *that*, as in *a car which I sold*.

For 250 years, grammarians have accused the best writers of violating rules like these, and for 250 years the best writers have ignored them. Which is lucky for the grammarians, because if writers did obey all the rules, grammarians would have to keep inventing new ones, or find another line of work. The fact is, none

of these invented rules reflects the consensus of unselfconscious usage of our best writers.

In this lesson, we focus on this third kind of rule, the handful of invented ones, because only they vex those who already write Standard English.

## Observing Rules Thoughtfully

It is, however, no simple matter to deal with these rules if you want to be thought of as someone who writes “correctly.” You could choose the worst-case policy: follow all the rules all the time because sometime, someone will criticize you for something—for beginning a sentence with *and* or ending it with *up*.

But if you mindlessly obey all the rules all the time, you risk becoming so obsessed with rules that you tie yourself in knots. And sooner or later, you will impose those rules—real or not—on others. After all, what good is learning a rule if all you can do is obey it?

The alternative to blind obedience is selective observance. But then you have to decide which rules to observe and which to ignore. And if you ignore an alleged rule, you may have to deal with someone whose passion for “good” grammar seems to endow her with the power to see in a split infinitive a sign of moral corruption and social decay.

If you want to avoid being accused of “lacking standards,” but refuse to submit to whatever “rule” someone can dredge up from ninth-grade English, you have to know more about these invented rules than the rule-mongers do. The rest of this lesson helps you do that.

## TWO KINDS OF INVENTED RULES

We can sort most of these invented rules into two groups: Folklore and Elegant Options.

### Folklore

These rules include those that most careful readers and writers ignore. You may not yet have had some of them inflicted on you, but chances are that one day you will. In what follows, the quotations that illustrate “violations” of these rules are from writers of considerable intellectual and scholarly stature or who, on matters of

usage, are reliable conservatives (some are both). A check mark indicates acceptable Standard English, despite what some grammarians claim.

1. “**Don’t begin sentences with *and* or *but*.**” This passage ignores the “rule” twice:

- ✓ **But**, it will be asked, is tact not an individual gift, therefore highly variable in its choices? **And** if that is so, what guidance can a manual offer, other than that of its author’s prejudices—mere impressionism?

—Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage: A Guide*,  
edited and completed by Jacques Barzun et al.

On this matter, it is useful to consult the guide used by conservative writers: the *second* edition of H. W. Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (first edition, Oxford University Press, 1926; second edition, 1965; third edition, 1997, considered too permissive by archconservatives). The second edition was edited by Sir Ernest Gowers, who, to Fowler’s original entry for *and* in the first edition, added this:

That it is a solecism to begin a sentence with *and* is a faintly lingering superstition. (p. 29)

To the original entry for *but*, he added “see *and*.” Some inexperienced writers do begin too many sentences with *and*, but that is an error not in grammar but of style.

Some insecure writers also think they should not begin a sentence with *because*. Not this:

- ✓ **Because** we have access to so much historical fact, today we know a good deal about changes within the humanities which were not apparent to those of any age much before our own and which the individual scholar must constantly reflect on.

—Walter Ong, S. J., “The Expanding Humanities and the Individual Scholar,” *Publication of the Modern Language Association*

This folklore about *because* appears in no handbook, but it is gaining currency. It probably stems from advice aimed at avoiding sentence FRAGMENTS like this one:

The plan was rejected. **Because** it was incomplete.

This rule about *because* has no basis in grammar. But oddly enough, it does reflect a small *stylistic* truth. In Lesson 5, we



look at a principle of style that tells us to arrange the elements of sentences so that information already part of a reader's knowledge comes *before* information less familiar to the reader (for a quick summary, skim pp. 76–77). It is a fact of English style that a SUBORDINATE CLAUSE beginning with *because* usually introduces new information:

- ✓ Some writers write graceless prose **because** they are seized by the idea that writing is good only when it's free of errors that only a grammarian can explain.

Reverse that order and you get a mildly awkward sentence:

**Because** some writers are seized by the idea that writing is good only when it's free of errors that only a grammarian can explain, they write graceless prose.

When a *because*-clause introduces new information, as it usually does, it should not begin a sentence, but end it. That, however, is not a rule of grammar; it is a principle of style.

If you want to *begin* a sentence with a clause expressing causation, be sure your reader is familiar with its substance. Then introduce the clause not with *because* but with *since*, because *since* implies that the reader already knows what is in the clause:

- ✓ **Since** our language seems to reflect our quality of mind, it is easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate mental or moral deficiency.

If you put a *since*-clause at the *end* of a sentence, the sentence ends weakly.

It is easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate mental or moral deficiency, **since** our language seems to reflect our quality of mind.

There are exceptions to this principle, but it's generally sound.

## 2. "Use the RELATIVE PRONOUN *that*—not *which*—for RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES." Allegedly, not this:

- ✓ Next is a typical situation **which** a practiced writer corrects "for style" virtually by reflex action.

—Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct* (p. 69)

Yet just a few sentences before, Barzun himself (one of our most eminent intellectual historians and critics of style) had asserted,

Us[e] *that* with defining [i.e. restrictive] clauses except when stylistic reasons interpose.

(In the sentence quoted above, no such reasons interpose.)

A rule has no force when someone as eminent as Barzun asserts it on one page, then violates it on the next, and his "error" is never caught, not by his editors, not by his proofreaders, not even by Barzun himself.

This "rule" is relatively new. It appeared in 1906 in Henry and Francis Fowler's *The King's English* (Oxford University Press; reprinted as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1973). The Fowlers thought that the random variation between *that* and *which* to begin a restrictive clause was messy, so they just asserted that henceforth writers should (with some exceptions) limit *which* to *nonrestrictive* clauses.

A nonrestrictive clause, you may recall, describes a noun naming a referent that you can identify unambiguously without the information in that clause. For example,

- ✓ ABCO Inc. ended its first bankruptcy, **which** it had filed in 1997.

A company can have only one first bankruptcy, so we can unambiguously identify the bankruptcy mentioned without the information in the following clause. We therefore call that clause *nonrestrictive*, because it does not further "restrict" or identify what the noun names, *its first bankruptcy*. In that context, we put a comma before the modifying clause and begin it with *which*. That rule is based on historical and contemporary usage.

But, claimed the Fowlers, for restrictive clauses, we should use not *which* but only *that*: For example,

- ✓ ABCO Inc. sold a product **that** [*not which*] made millions.

Since ABCO presumably makes many products, the clause *that made millions* "restricts" the product to only the one that made millions, and so, said the Fowlers, it should begin with *that*.

Francis died in 1918, but Henry continued the family tradition with *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. In that

landmark work, he discussed the finer points of *which* and *that*, then added this:

Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers. (p. 635)

That wistful observation was kept in the second edition and again in the third. (For another allegedly incorrect *which*, see the passage by Walter Ong on p. 17.)

I confess I follow Fowler's advice, not because a restrictive *which* is an error, but because *that* has a softer sound. I do sometimes choose a *which* when it's within a word or two of a *that*, because I don't like the sound of two *thats* close together:

- ✓ We all have **that** one rule **that** we will not give up.
- ✓ We all have **that** one rule **which** we will not give up.

3. **"Use fewer with nouns you count, less with nouns you cannot."** Allegedly not this:

- ✓ I can remember no **less** than five occasions when the correspondence columns of *The Times* rocked with volleys of letters . . .

—Noel Gilroy Annan, Lord Annan, "The Life of the Mind in British Universities Today," *American Council of Learned Societies Newsletter*

No one uses *fewer* with mass nouns (*fewer dirt*) but educated writers often use *less* with countable plural nouns (*less resources*).

4. **"Use since and while to refer only to time, not to mean because or although."** Most careful writers use *since* with a meaning close to *because* but, as mentioned above, with an added sense of 'What follows I assume you already know':

- ✓ **Since** asbestos is dangerous, it should be removed carefully.

Nor do most careful writers restrict *while* to its temporal sense (*We'll wait while you eat*), but also use it with a meaning close to 'I assume you know what I state in this clause, but what I assert in the next will qualify it':

- ✓ **While** we agree on a date, we disagree about the place.

In both cases, put the clause first in a sentence, because both *since* and *while* imply that the reader already knows what is in

a clause they introduce. When you put such a clause last, the sentence ends weakly:

Asbestos should be removed carefully, since it is dangerous.

We disagree about the place, while we agree on a date.

**Here's the point:** If writers whom we judge to be competent regularly violate some alleged rule and most careful readers never notice, then the rule has no force. In those cases, it is not writers who should change their usage, but grammarians who should change their rules.

## Elegant Options

These next "rules" complement the Real Rules: call them *Elegant Options*. Most readers do not notice when you observe a Real Rule, but does when you violates it (like that). On the other hand, few readers notice when you violate one of these optional rules, but some do when you observe it, because doing so makes your writing seem just a bit more self-consciously formal.

1. **"Don't split infinitives."** Purists condemn Dwight MacDon-ald, a linguistic archconservative, for this sentence (my emphasis in all the examples that follow).

- ✓ One wonders why Dr. Gove and his editors did not think of labeling *knowed* as substandard right where it occurs, and one suspects that they wanted to **slightly conceal** the fact . . .

—"The String Untuned," *The New Yorker*

They would require

they wanted to **conceal slightly** the fact . . .

Infinitives are now split so often that when you avoid splitting one, careful readers may think you are trying to be especially correct, whether you are or not.

2. **"Use whom as the object of a verb or preposition."** Purists would condemn William Zinsser for this use of *who*:

- ✓ Soon after you confront this matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: **"Who** am I writing for?"

—*On Writing Well*

They would insist on

another question will occur to you: “For **whom** am I writing?”

Most readers take *whom* as a sign of self-conscious correctness, so when a writer uses it incorrectly, that choice is probably a sign of insecurity, as in this sentence:

The committee must decide **whom** should be promoted.

In that sentence, *whom* is the subject of the verb *should be promoted*, so it should be *who*. Here is an actual rule: use *who* when it is the subject of a verb *in its own clause*; use *whom* only when it is an object in its own clause.

**QUICK TIP:** If the relative clause modifies a noun and you can delete the relative pronoun and still make sense, the correct form is *whom*:

- ✓ The committee chose someone **whom** they trusted.
- ✓ The committee chose someone [ ] they trusted.

If you cannot delete the *who/whom*, the correct form is *who*:

- ✓ The committee chose someone **who** earned their trust.
- The committee chose someone [ ] earned their trust.

Two exceptions: (1) you cannot delete *whom* when it begins a clause that is the object of a verb. In that case, you have to depend on the grammar of the clause:

- ✓ The committee decided **whom** they should choose.
- ✓ The committee decided **who** was to be chosen.

Always use *whom* when it is the object of a preposition:

The committee chose someone **in whom** they had confidence.

3. “**Don’t end a sentence with a preposition.**” Purists condemn Sir Ernest Gowers, editor of Fowler’s second edition, for this:

- ✓ The peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official **with**.

—*The Complete Plain Words*

and insist on this:

... a stick **with which** to beat the official.

The first is correct; the second is more formal. (Again, see the Ong passage on p. 17.) And when you choose to shift both the preposition and its *whom* to the left, your sentence seems more formal yet. Compare:

- ✓ The man I met **with** was the man I had written **to**.
- ✓ The man **with whom** I met was the man **to whom** I had written.

A preposition can, however, can end a sentence weakly (see pp. 166–167). George Orwell may have chosen to end this next sentence with *from* to make a sly point about English grammar, but I suspect it just ended up there (and note the “incorrect” *which*):

[The defense of the English language] has nothing to do with . . . the setting up of a “standard English” **which** must never be departed **from**.

—George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

This would have been less awkward and more emphatic:

We do not defend English just to create a “standard English” whose rules we must always obey.

4. “**Use the singular with none and any.**” *None* and *any* were originally singular, but today most writers use them as plural, so if you use them as singular, some readers will notice. The second sentence below is a bit more formal than the first:

- ✓ **None** of the reasons **are** sufficient to end the project.
- ✓ **None** of the reasons **is** sufficient to end the project.

When you are under close scrutiny, you might choose to observe all these optional rules. Ordinarily, though, they are ignored by most careful writers, which is to say they are not rules at all, but rather stylistic choices that create a slightly formal tone. If you adopt the worst-case approach and observe them all, all the time—well, private virtues are their own reward.

## Hobgoblins

For some unknown reason, a handful of items has become the object of particularly zealous abuse. There's no explaining why; none of them interferes with clarity or concision.

1. **"Never use *like* for *as* or *as if*."** Not this:

✓ These operations failed **like** the earlier ones did.

But this:

✓ These operations failed **as** the earlier ones did.

*Like* became a SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION in the eighteenth century when writers began to drop *as* from the conjunctive phrase *like as*, leaving just *like* as the conjunction. This process is called *elision*, a common linguistic change. It is telling that the editor of the second edition of Fowler (the one favored by conservatives) deleted *like* for *as* from Fowler's list of "Illiteracies" and moved it into the category of "Sturdy Indefensibles."

2. **"Don't use *hopefully* to mean 'I hope.'"** Not this:

✓ Hopefully, it will not rain.

But this:

✓ I hope that it will not rain.

This "rule" dates from the middle of the twentieth century. It has no basis in logic or grammar and parallels the usage of other words that no one abuses, words such as *candidly*, *frankly*, *sadly*, and *happily*:

✓ Candidly, we may fail. (That is, *I am candid when I say we may fail*.)

✓ Seriously, we must go. (That is, *I am serious when I say we must go*.)

3. **"Don't use *finalize* to mean 'finish' or 'complete.'"** But *finalize* doesn't mean just 'finish.' It means 'to clean up the last few details,' a sense captured by no other word. Moreover, if we think *finalize* is bad because *-ize* is ugly, we would have to reject *nationalize*, *synthesize*, and *rationalize*, along with hundreds of other useful words.

4. **"Don't use *impact* as a verb, as in *The survey impacted our strategy*. Use it only as a noun, as in *The survey had an***

*impact on our strategy*." *Impact* has been a verb for 400 years, but on some people, historical evidence has none.

5. **"Don't modify absolute words such as *perfect*, *unique*, *final*, or *complete* with *very*, *more*, *quite*, and *so on*."** That rule would have deprived us of this familiar sentence:

✓ We the People of the United States, in order to form a **more perfect** union . . .

(Even so, this is a rule worth following.)

6. **"Never ever use *irregardless* for *regardless* or *irrespective*."** However arbitrary this rule is, follow it. Use *irregardless* and some will judge you irredeemable.

## Some Words That Attract Special Attention

A few words are so often confused with others that careful readers are likely to note your careful usage when you correctly distinguish them—*flaunt* and *flout* for example. When you use them correctly, those who think the difference matters are likely to note that at least *you* know that *flaunt* means 'to display conspicuously' and that *flout* means 'to scorn a rule or standard.' Thus if you chose to scorn the rule about *flaunt* and *flout*, you would not flout your flaunting it, but flaunt your flouting it. Here are some others:

**aggravate** means 'to make worse.' It does not mean to 'annoy.' You can aggravate an injury but not a person.

**anticipate** means 'to prepare for a contingency.' It does not mean just 'expect.' You anticipate a question when you prepare its answer before it's asked; if you know it's coming but don't prepare, you only expect it.

**anxious** means 'uneasy' not 'eager.' You're eager to leave if you're happy to. You're anxious about leaving if it makes you nervous.

**blackmail** means 'to extort by threatening to reveal damaging information.' It does not mean simply 'coerce.' One country cannot blackmail another with nuclear weapons when it only threatens to use them.

**cohort** means 'a group who attends on someone.' It does not mean a single accompanying person. When Prince Charles married his friend she became his 'consort'; his hangers-on are still his cohort.

**comprise** means 'to include all parts in a single unit.' It is not synonymous with *constitute*. The alphabet is not comprised by its letters;

it comprises them. Letters *constitute* the alphabet, which is thus constituted by them.

**continuous** means 'without interruption.' It is not synonymous with *continual*, which means an activity through time, with interruptions. If you *continuously* interrupt someone, that person will never say a word because your interruption will never stop. If you *continually* interrupt, you let the other person finish a sentence from time to time.

**disinterested** means 'neutral.' It does not mean 'uninterested.' A judge should be disinterested in the outcome of a case, but not uninterested in it. (Incidentally, the original meaning of *disinterested* was 'to be uninterested.')

**enormity** means 'hugely bad.' It does not mean 'enormous.' In private, a belch might be enormous, but at a state funeral, it would also be an enormity.

**fortuitous** means 'by chance.' It does not mean 'fortunate.' You are fortunate when you fortuitously pick the right number in the lottery.

**fulsome** means 'sickeningly excessive.' It does not mean just 'much.' We all enjoy praise, except when it becomes fulsome.

**notorious** means 'known for bad behavior.' It does not mean 'famous.' Frank Sinatra was a famous singer but a notorious bully.

These days only a few readers still care about these distinctions, but they may be just those whose judgment carries special weight when it matters the most. It takes only a few minutes to learn to use these words in ways that testify to your precision, so it may be worth doing so, especially if you also think their distinctions are worth preserving.

On the other hand, you get no points for correctly distinguishing *imply* and *infer*, *principal* and *principle*, *accept* and *except*, *capital* and *capitol*, *affect* and *effect*, *proceed* and *precede*, *discrete* and *discreet*. That's just expected of a schooled writer. Most careful readers also notice when a Latinate or Greek plural noun is used as a singular, so you might want to keep these straight, too:

<b>Singular</b>	datum	criterion	medium	stratum	phenomenon
<b>Plural</b>	data	criteria	media	strata	phenomena

**Here's the point:** You can't predict good grammar or correct usage by logic or general rule. You have to learn the rules one-by-one and accept the fact that some of them, probably most of them, are arbitrary and idiosyncratic.

## A PROBLEM: PRONOUNS AND GENDER BIAS

### Pronouns and Their Referents

We expect literate writers to make verbs agree with subjects:

- ✓ Our **reasons** ARE based on solid evidence.

We also expect their pronouns to agree with antecedents. Not this:

Early **efforts** to oppose the hydrogen bomb failed because **it** ignored political issues. **No one** wanted to expose **themselves** to anti-Communist hysteria.

But this:

- ✓ Early **efforts** to oppose the hydrogen bomb failed because **they** ignored political issues. **No one** wanted to expose **himself** to anti-Communist hysteria.

There are, however, two problems with making pronouns agree with their referents.

First, do we use a singular or plural pronoun when referring to a noun that is singular in grammar but plural in meaning? For example, when we refer to singular nouns such as a *group*, *committee*, *staff*, *administration*, and so on, do we use a singular or plural verb? Some writers use a singular verb and pronoun when the group acts as a single entity:

- ✓ The **committee** HAS met but has not yet made **its** decision.

But they use a plural verb and pronoun when its members act individually:

- ✓ The **faculty** HAVE the memo, but not all of **them** have read it.

These days plurals are irregularly used in both senses (but the plural is the rule in British English).

Second, what pronoun do we use, *it* or *they*, to refer to pronouns such as *someone*, *everyone*, *no one* and to singular common nouns that signal no gender: *teacher*, *doctor*, *student*? We casually use *they*:

**Everyone** knows **they** must answer for **their** actions.

When a **person** is on drugs, it is hard to help **them**.

Formal usage requires a singular pronoun:

✓ **Everyone** realizes that **he** must answer for **his** actions.

But that rule raises the problem of biased language.

## Gender and Biased Language

Common sense demands that we don't gratuitously offend readers, but if we reject *he* as a generic pronoun because it's biased and *they* because some readers consider it ungrammatical, we are left with a lot of bad choices. Some writers choose a clumsy *he* or *she*; others choose a worse *he/she* or even *s/he*.

If a **writer** ignores the ethnicity of **his** or **her** readers, **s/he** may respond in ways **the writer** would not expect to words that to **him** or **her** are innocent of bias.

Some writers substitute plurals for singulars:

✓ When **writers** ignore **their** readers' ethnicity, **they** may respond in ways **they** might not expect to words that are to **them** innocent of bias.

But in that sentence, *they*, *their*, and *them* are confusing, because they can refer to different referents, either writers or readers. And to the careful ear, a sentence with singular nouns and pronouns seems a shade more precise than one with plural nouns and pronouns. Compare the sentence above with this one:

When a **writer** ignores **his** reader's ethnicity, **his** reader may respond in ways that **he** might not expect to words that are to **him** innocent of bias.

We can try a first person *we*,

✓ If **we** ignore the ethnicity of **our** readers, they may respond in ways **we** would not expect to words that to **us** are innocent of bias.

But *we* can also be ambiguous. We could also try impersonal abstraction, but that creates its own problem:

Failure to consider ethnicity may lead to unexpected responses to words considered innocent of bias.

Finally, we can alternately use *he* and *she*, as I have. But that's not a perfect solution either, because some readers find *she* as stylistically intrusive as *he/she*. A reviewer in the *New York Times*, for example, wondered what to make of an author whom the reviewer charged with attempting to

right history's wrongs to women by referring to random examples as "she," as in "Ask a particle physicist what happens when a quark is knocked out of a proton, and she will tell you . . .," which strikes this reader as oddly patronizing to women.

(We might wonder how it strikes women who happen to be particle physicists.)

For years to come, we'll have a problem with singular generic pronouns, and to some readers, any solution will be awkward. I suspect that eventually we will accept the plural *they* as a correct singular:

✓ **No one** should turn in **their** writing unedited.

Some claim that such compromises lead to lazy imprecision. Whatever the future, we have a choice now, and that's not a bad thing, because our choices define who we are.

## SUMMING UP

We must write correctly, but if in defining correctness we ignore the difference between fact and folklore, we risk overlooking what is really important—the choices that make our writing dense and wordy or clear and concise. We are not precise when we merely get right the *whiches* and *thats* and avoid *finalize* and *hopefully*. Many who obsess on such details are oblivious to this more serious kind of imprecision:

Too precise a specification of information processing requirements incurs the risk of overestimation resulting in unused capacity or inefficient use of costly resources or of underestimation leading to ineffectiveness or other inefficiencies.

That means,

✓ When you specify too precisely the resources you need to process information, you may overestimate. If you do, you risk having more capacity than you need or using costly resources inefficiently.

Both are grammatically precise, but who would choose to read more of the first?

I suspect that those who observe all the rules all the time do so not because they want to protect the integrity of the language or the quality of our culture, but to assert a style of their own. Some of us are straightforward and plain speaking; others take pleasure in a bit of elegance, in a touch of fastidiously self-conscious “class.” It is an impulse we should not scorn, so long as it is not a pretext to discriminate and is subordinate to the more important matters to which we now turn—the choices that define not “good grammar,” but clarity and grace.

## A LIST OF REAL AND IMAGINED ERRORS

Here is a list of the “errors” covered in this and the following lessons and the pages on which they are discussed.

### INDIVIDUAL WORD USAGE

*And*, beginning a sentence, 17  
*Any*, with singular verb, 23  
*Because*, beginning a sentence, 17  
*But*, beginning a sentence, 17  
*Fewer* vs. *less*, 20  
*Finalize*, 24  
*Hopefully*, 24  
*Impact*, as a verb, 24  
*Irregardless*, 25  
*Like*, subordinating conjunction, 24  
*None*, with singular verb, 23  
*Perfect*, modified, 25  
*Since*, as causal conjunction, 17  
*That* vs. *which* for relative clause, 18–20  
*They*, as singular pronoun, 28–29  
*Which* vs. *that* for relative clause, 18–20  
*While*, as concessive conjunction, 20–21  
*Who* vs. *whom*, 21

### GRAMMAR

Coordination, faulty, 149–150  
 Coordination, incorrect, 149–150  
 Modifier, dangling, 66  
 Modifier, misplaced, 151  
 Parallelism, faulty, 149–150  
 Preposition, ending sentence, 22  
 Pronoun, referent agreement, 28–29  
 Split infinitive, 21  
 Subject-verb agreement, 27  
 Voice, shift in, 62–63

### PUNCTUATION

Apostrophe, use of, 257–258  
 Comma splice, 244  
 Comma, inappropriate, 248–257  
 Quotation marks, and marks of punctuation, 152–155  
 Semicolon, inappropriate, 248  
 Sentence fragment, 17, 246–247  
 Sentence, fused, 239  
 Sentence, run-on, 239

## PART TWO

# Clarity

*Everything that can be thought at all  
 can be thought clearly.*

*Everything that can be said can be said clearly.*

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

*It takes less time to learn to write nobly than to  
 learn to write lightly and straightforwardly.*

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE